

A CHRISTIAN CITIZEN SPEAKS HIS CONVICTION.

As America expands in population and in Gross National Product; in her wealth and military strength; in her literacy and scientific sophistication - it also increases in her role of world leadership responsibility, and in the weight of problems this status inflicts as inescapable burdens. Our great quandary in these days of tremendous tension, is how to attain the same high levels of wisdom, honesty and moral courage with which to meet these problems.

I am not the first to state that we today, in our domestic relationships - and particularly in race relations - are meeting the second great crisis in our national history. A century ago, the revered president, Abraham Lincoln, stood at Gettysburg to remind us for all times that "... we are testing here whether this nation or any nation (conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal) may long endure." Then, we fought one of the most vicious and deadly of all wars up to that time - brother against brother, father against son, because we had displayed neither the wisdom, foresight, honesty or courage as a nation to follow the dictates of a Redeemer who said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

I say again that this is considered by many observers of the social scene to be a period of the second great domestic crisis ever faced by our nation. The first was one brought to the fore by those who protested against the immorality and injustice of the institution of human slavery which we, a Christian nation, had permitted to throttle our consciences for almost two-and-a-half centuries. Those protestors were unpopular then, as are our protestors now; they were considered to be anti-social troublemakers; were looked upon by the snug, sheltered, self-satisfied elements in the population, who were the majority, as senseless agitators who would destroy the nation. The critics of the Abolition movement knew little of the sordid history of the institution of slavery; knew even less about its brutalizing effect upon both slave and master; and cared little about the nature of the cancerous growth of this evil in the nation, as long as it did not too obviously impinge upon their own sheltered lives. It was so much easier to say: "Away with the agitators and destroyers", than it was to take one's conscience to the Lord of All for cleansing. Even the soul-searching writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe failed

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to reach enough of the population to help avert the destructive military confrontation which neglect brought upon us. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was America's first real opportunity to achieve intellectual and emotional understanding of the nature of the crisis about which the Abolitionists had raised their protests.

Among the most militant and effective of the spokesmen for the Abolition movement was a Negro, Frederick Douglass; born in slavery with little knowledge of his parentage or ancestry, he was a rebel from early youth, who at one time was consigned to the hands and refined cruelties of the slave-breaker. Douglass escaped and found his way North where he soon became active in the anti-slavery movement as one of its most articulate advocates. In his work, he was associated with the few dedicated white Christians who had the courage of their convictions in identifying with the Abolition movement; men such as Charles Sumner, Henry Ward Beecher, John Brown and other liberals of the day. Alternating between hopefulness and despair as he reacted to the various attitudes displayed by the white majority, Frederick Douglass led the first American sit-in of a Massachusetts railroad station in protest against its segregated facilities, just 115 years ago; led a fight involving the picketing of segregated public schools in Rochester, N.Y., just 120 years ago; and went up and down the country-wide assailing the hypocrisy of Christians who prayed to the God of justice and mercy, while at the same time advocating the segregation of black Christians, and supporting the institution of slavery, by passive acceptance if not in active advocacy.

Yes, in Fred Douglass' time, we were a divided nation - divided on the basic issues of morality versus bigotry; of social unity versus selfish separatism. It was left for Sojourner Truth, an unlettered mystic and crusader for black freedom and a principal operator in the Underground Railway, to bring Frederick Douglass back from anger and despair, as he addressed an indifferent audience of white people on one occasion. Noting the emotional strain which Douglass was suffering, Sojourner Truth arose in the back of the auditorium and asked, in her strong, vibrant voice, "Frederick, is God dead?" This served to bring the speaker back to a consciousness of his lapse from reality and objectivity. Throughout that very crucial period in American history, and during the bloody civil war that resulted from selfishness and indifference, the emotional involvement of the American people caused that pregnant question to be hurled again and again - "America, is God dead?"

Today, we are in a second and comparable period of our national history. Aside from the added complexities of a war being fought on Asian soil, our nation is divided on the issues of racism versus common humanity, as neverbefore except in those days preceding the Civil War. Again, we are "testing" in the terms put forth by Abraham Lincoln a century go. Can America prevail as a free, democratic society while maintaining a second class citizenship category based upon skin color? Can we afford to share Freedom - share it with the first immigrant group to be brought to these shores for purposes of exploitation? Can we dare not to share Freedom, if we would follow a common sense effort to preserve it for ourselves?

The dilemma confronting America has been brought before us to the degree, that with our hyper-efficient communications system, it is impossible for the individual like you and me to avoid the painful task of making personal decisions. For instance, we have before us this day two separate and independent reports, each growing out of intensive and objective research efforts conducted by eminent citizens of highest integrity and great courage, and each receiving wide coverage through our several communications media. The New Jersey Governor's Select Commission on Civil Disorder, and the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, have issued study reports assessing the causes of civil unrest on the racial front; examining the roles of initiators and perpetrators of acts of civil disobedience; analyzing the nature of public reaction and contributions to the whole; and terminating in concrete suggestions of remedies to be found. To the great majority of 200 million Americans, these are a new and shocking revelation; to those of us who have been in the thick of the fray for half a century or less, it is an old, old story that is being retold, over and over again, to an indifferent public or to hostile, selfishly motivated cynics. It is the same story told once by the Abolitionists and by their successors in post-Civil War crusades for social rehabilitation of former slaves. It is the same story told by the Niagara movement, assembled in 1908 to analyze the causes of racial conflict; and the same story told incessantly since then by the successors to the Niagara Movement: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League. It is the same story told following riots in Chicago, Washington and Tulsa, after World War I when white ruffians took upon themselves the bloody task of "putting those black soldiers in their place"; and after the riots following World War II in Detroit, East St. Louis and elsewhere, caused by the same mistaken motivations of white citizens.

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The race problem in America has been the subject of research to a greater degree than any other human relations situation in the entire world. From de Tocqueville in the middle of the 19th century, until the National Advisory Commission report in the last third of the 20th century, every imaginable kind of inquiry has been made, stemming from innumerable hypotheses, and for myriads of purposes. Almost without exception these studies have disclosed the contributions to unrest caused by physical and psychological separation of segments of the human family, with skin-color as the criterion of excellence or of nonentity; dissatisfactions caused by unemployment and under-employment due to discriminatory selective processes; by limited and ill-advised programs of "education" of the exploited group; by segregated, and ipso facto, inferior and costly housing bequeathed to the minority - research in all these things, except into the peculiar and contradictory phenomenon of Christian America's great success in avoiding Christian responsibility for corrective action.

As we note the spread of fear and bewilderment in the social scene; as we see the rising tide of what is termed "backlash" following what seems to some to be the irrational demands of black revolutionaries; as we note signs of divisiveness in our communities, it becomes increasingly necessary for Christians to ask themselves: "Is God dead?" The answer can be extremely revealing to each of us bold enough to ask ourselves the question. Who has the answer? You and I do! Because, if we truly respond to the teachings of the Master - if we truly consider ourselves to be Christians, we must come to the admission ultimately that God lives in and through us, through our devotion to Him and His teachings, through our living the lives He would have us live, working in the interest of His Kingdom. If we truly consider ourselves to be Christians, we would know that the Christian people of America, guided by unlimited and well-documented facts, could resolve our problems in justice, in honor, in peace. We would find ourselves ultimately reviewing very seriously the words of our Lord Jesus Christ who said:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy soul, with all thy heart, with all thy mind. This is the first and great Commandment and the second is like unto it; thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two Commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

As that strong, black, courageous woman raised her voice more than a century ago to bring the gifted, sensitive but disillusioned Frederick Douglass back to objective consideration of the grave issues of that day, I raise my voice in asking ourselves, here and now, "Fellow Citizens, is God dead?" Is He living in us through our works; or

by abdication of our Christian responsibilities, have we permitted Him to die?
Basic solutions to our national crisis are hanging upon the answers ~~we~~^{we} are able to
bring to this question.

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